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Account of his
arrests

Letter # 5
July 18, after arrests (2)

Letter No. 5 (8 pages)

P.O. Box 275
Ruleville, Miss.
July 18, 1964

Dear Friends:

It has been a swinging week—lots to tell yawl about. But first let me ask you again to be careful about what gets sent where. In these letters I try to be candid about whats happening to me, but a lot of what I say is not fit for the press. Some of it could have quite dangerous repercussions if it ever got back down here. I will have our mass media man read this and mark the sections that should not be published. Feel free to use the other stuff in local papers if you think it has any merit.

The week started off quite serenely with a canvassing trip to Indianola on Monday afternoon. Our numbers have been cut in half by the moving of 5 voter registration workers to the adjoining county. I drove up to Drew to see if the one-legged WWI veteran was ready to go to the court house to register. He said he was ready at any time, though he had lost his glasses and so couldn't read very well. I assured him that the important thing was to take the stand of going down. It will help the Justice Dept. case against this registra to have as many people attempt to register as possible. I accompanied Mr. K., a proud 70-year-old, into the court house. We were informed that the registrar was out for a while and that I would have to leave as soon as he came back. I suggested that Mr. K. take the empty seat but he was reluctant to risk a rebuke by sitting "off bounds". We stood there for ten minutes. I was afraid that I might make a scene and thus make it harder on Mr. K. by asking if he could sit there. I also didn't think he should have to ask. Finally the registrar came in and asked me if I intended to help Mr. K. register. I said, "no", and asked him if Mr. K. could have a seat. He said "of course". Our hesitancy in this instance had not been warranted, but what about next time? I sat out on the porch of the columned courthouse and waited. It didn't take long. The print was so fine that Mr. K. couldn't make much out of it. We went over to a Negro Cafe for a pop and then I left to do some canvassing. Mr. K. assured me that the 2 hour wait wouldn't bother him. The fight for Freedom needs a lot of patience, he thought, and that was one thing he was strong on. The canvassing went pretty well. I got 5 people to sign the freedom registration form and three who were prepared to go down to the court house. When I got back to the cafe to meet the rest a number of teen-age kids had congegrated, both because this was a teen-age hang out and because they were curious about what the next action was going to be. A tall timid white policeman drove up and told McLaurin that the crowd would have to disperse because they were blocking the sidewalk. MacLaurin pointed out that the "side Walk" at that point was not public but a cement slab constructed by the cafe owner. Thus it was up to them whether they wanted people there. The police went in to ask the cafe proprietor. She said "Yes sah" she didn't want people out there. The kids didn't budge when the cop told them to move on. Mac suggested that they all go inside. Poor cop, never have they had such handling. Mac is very skillfull at running legal circles around the poor cops who are woefully unprepared for anyone to question their orders.

Tuesday evening we were planning an open air mass meeting in Drew, so four of us went up to distribute flyers announcing it. I talked to a woman who had been down to register a week before. She was afraid. Her husband had lost his job. Even before we got there a couple of her sons had been man handled by the police. She was Mr.

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full of wild rumors about shootings and beatings, etc. I checked out two of them later. They were groundless. This sort of rumor-spreading is quite prevalent when people get really scared. One of our workers who was working in another part of town was picked up by the police. He had to explain to the mayor that it is perfectly legal to give people literature on their own property. Of course the discussion got to intermarriage. Dan allowed as how he wouldn't mind if his sister married a Negro. The Mayor responded, "You're not an American. You have no respect for the white race. You're right where you belong with all them niggers." I think I would have responded to the mayor's query that I felt that my sister ought to decide for herself who she wanted to marry. Some of you may think that the Kid's answer was unduly provocative. I think that one of the main objectives in talking to whites down here is to convey clearly that one simply doesn't put any importance on race when it comes to dealing with people. The predominant importance of race is the "given" on which the Southern attitude structure is built. Southerners don't often have the opportunity to have this "given" questioned.

At 6 p.m. we returned for the meeting to be held in front of a church, which wouldn't let us meet inside, but hadn't told us not to meet outside. A number of kids collected and stood around in a circle with about 15 of us to sing freedom songs. Across the street perhaps 100 adults stood watching. We sang "Which Side Are You On" and Mac made some pointed comments about coming over to stand for freedom. Since this was the first meeting in town, we passed out mimeoed song sheets. Fred Miller, Negro from Mobile, stepped out to the edge of the street to give somebody a sheet. The cops nabbed him. I was about to follow suit so he wouldn't be alone, but Mac's policy was to ignore the arrest. We sang on mightily "Ain't going to let no jailing turn me around". A group of girls was sort of leaning against the cars on the periphery of the meeting. Mac went over to encourage them to join us. I gave a couple of song sheets to the girls and showed them which number we were singing. A cop rushed across the street and told me to come along. I guess I was sort of aware that my actions would get me arrested, but felt that we had to show these girls that we were not afraid. I was also concerned with what might happen to Fred if he was the only one. The cop had a rifle on the front floor. He was calm. Asked me where I came from and said he had a sister in Philly. He asked me why I was down here disturbing things. Wouldn't he be arrested in Philly if he went up there and broke laws? I was silent. He was quite scrupulous about letting me make a phone call. Didn't even insist on it being collect. He seemed scared of doing something wrong. I was then driven to a little concrete structure which looked like a power house. I could hear Fred's courageous, off key rendition of a freedom song from inside and joined him as we approached. He was very happy to see me. He said the guy had ordered him out of the car and he hadn't known that it was to make a phone call. He asked rather anxiously if this was the jail. Not long thereafter, four more of our group drove up next door to make their calls. When they got locked up we laughed about how integrated the group was--male, female, black and white. One of the staff workers who had been in 106 times said this was the first time that had happened. The Drew jail consists of three small cells off a wide hall. It was filthy, hot and stuffy. A cop came back to give us some toilet paper. Soon our people got the one girl, white, bailed out because they were going to transport her to Indianola to the county jail. We sang songs for a while, and

yelled greetings to Negroes who drove by curiously. I asked the cop if he could open another cell as there were not enough beds accessible to us. He mumbled something about how that would be impossible and left. They hadn't confiscated anything and one of the guys had a battered copy of "The Other American" so we divided up the chapters. I got the dismal one on the problems of the aged. The virtual imprisonment of single old women in dingy single rooms. People whose sole entertainment is walking to the corner and back once a week, weather permitting. To be old and forgotten is certainly a more vicious sentence than mine but this was little consolation. (I wouldn't recommend that book for those planning to do time). Presently the chief came back and opened another cell and put the white boys in it and locked it again. They were a bit peeved at me for instigating the whole thing, but had a good humored name calling session about it. At around ten p.m., 14 FBI agents came to interview us. The two staff workers were not enthused about talking with the FBI. From past experience they had learned to distrust the role of the FBI. We said we wanted to see our lawyers first. They were perturbed about coming out late at night and then being turned away. The problem is that in the past they have sometimes turned statements over to the local officials thus giving away the defendant's hand. This fear was confirmed the next day. One of the guys overheard the chief of police ask the FBI for our statements and the FBI man said "Well we'll talk about that later". I tried to get them to promise not to give my testimony to the police. They were evasive. Well, the night was spent swatting mosquitos. The most significant incident was when an old Negro couple walked by in front of the jail and asked how we were doing. They said they supported us and the old lady said "God bless you all." This in the context of a tense town with a pretty constant stream of whites in cars driving by.

Next Morning at 8 a.m. the chief came in with two hamburgers apiece for all of us. They don't have cooking facilities so send out for the food for prisoners. A little after nine we were taken to City Hall to be arraigned and to meet our lawyers. The charge against me was unlawful distribution of literature, bail \$100. The mayor, who presided, seemed quite awed by all these lawyers. (Three). He was careful to be quite proper. They also asked to see draft cards. They were quite baffled to hear that I was in Service and wanted to know what branch. Apparently alternative service is unheard of down here. There was one very amusing incident. They wanted to know my roommates' home address. Well of course it didn't agree with the place of his draft board. Then he explained how his family had moved and he had moved two or three times since he was 18. This was very hard for small town folk to understand and they viewed it with utmost suspicion. We were fingerprinted and had mug shots taken. The lawyers told us that the bail money hadn't been raised yet, but that they hoped to get it soon. We went back to the cell for about an hour or so when the FBI came back. They took us over to the City Hall to interview us. We declined to sign statements. They were pretty square with me though asked some of the others irrelevant questions about their past political activities. By the time they were finished, the lawyers were back with bail. Mrs. West, from across the street, fixed us a wonderful feast.

Already Wednesday morning at 4:30, before we were out of jail, the gang had been up to Drew to pass out flyers to the workers before they went to the fields about a meeting that evening. I got up

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to the community center too late to catch the first cars that left at 5:30 p.m. for that meeting and was relieved because I was dead tired and had a head-ache. But who should drive up but one of my cellmates of the night before who was going up. So off we went, agreeing that we were going to stay clear of the cops tonight. When we got up there we found the group, a much larger group than the night before with a considerable number of adults, singing on the lot next to the church grounds. The police had put pressure on the deacons to deny us the use of the church grounds. There were deputies in great profusion this time in their white helmets. The street had been barricaded off, but there was still a large crowd watching from the other side of the street. As we arrived Mac was making a forceful speech about how the white's phobia about getting close in anyway to Negroes was a hoax. He said it's your dirty mama who cooks their food and minds the kids and when they go to a party lies down on their bed. The speech was being well received. Just then the cop came up with an old lady who said she owned the lot we were meeting on. The chief called Mac over to the car and the lady told him the niggers didn't want us around and we had to get off her property. Then the chief told us to disperse or be arrested. Mac said well why don't we meet in the street? The chief said he would have us arrested. Mac said that all who wanted to stand for freedom should meet in the street. A good portion of the group walked into the street. I held back, but when I saw so many local people taking the courageous step I was drawn to support them. The deputies marched us off to the little jail we had left just that morning. This time the place was pretty crowded. There were about ten of us plus 5 kids from the Ruleville Student Movement and ten local people. There was one high-school boy from Drew who had been on his way to football practice, about 6 ladies in their thirties who worried a bit about their families but were generally quite solid in commitment. We sang and congratulated each other on being there. Then came the long process of making phone calls. They ferried us up to the city hall four at a time to make calls. I was very grateful for the abundance of deputies and sheriff's men from Indianola because the whole center of town and the jail were surrounded by whites sitting in their cars or standing and watching with their arms folded across their chests. I was escorted by a deputy sheriff who looked a bit like Matt Dillon—a big slow-moving six-shooter-toting type, not too cerebral, I would guess—to another building to make my call. The call was presided over by the chief's wife who was very polite but took notes on the whole thing. Later when I was back in the cell, a local women reported that when she went to make her call this same lady had called her a dirty rotten thing and cut her off before the allotted three minutes were up. (This was the clearest experience I had had with the two faces of Southern Hospitality.) I talked in the last letter about how people tell you with a straight face that they treat Negroes wonderfully down here. This opinion is made possible by the double standard. I guess we are all guilty of using the double standard. Even if we try to treat each person as an individual, there are some we don't cotton to and are liable not to treat with the same consideration as we would treat a friend. (Both, nonviolence and democracy are opposed to the double standard.)

Well, it took them over an hour to decide where to send us all and how to get us there but finally we set out in a long convoy, first to the county farm to let off the Negroes men and women, and.

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then on to the county jail to let off the whites. We were a bit scared about the prospects of landing in a cell with a bunch of whites, so ditched our pins. We were marched up the the second floor by a Negro jailor and put in a cell with one white prisoner. The cell was very small with three double bunks, one of the beds had no mattress and was strewn with the refuse of past borders. We told the guy that we had been picked up for standing in the street and bitched profusely about the injustice. He had been there a week. Was picked up he said for drinking two beers, charged with disturbing the peace and sentenced to a month at the county farm! He was endowed with this typical attitude toward Negroes—was really bugged at the way the Negro jailor and trustys gave the Negro inmates preferential treatment—but had some very healthy grievances against the system down here and I think we might have made some progress with him if we hadn't been so cautious about revealing our identity. Apparently the county farm is 2,000 acres of cotton land so it takes some doing to keep it supplied with free labor. Well, we talked quite a while about how to work out shifts since we were two beds short. By this time my head was splitting. We finally crowded together on a bunk so narrow that one had to lie on his side if the other wanted to lie flat. This night the mosquitoes were not bad but it got real cold by morning. At seven thirty we were served bisquits of a terrible soggy leaden consistency, molasses and salt-back. The white inmate pointed out the hanging rig right outside our cell door. There have, he said been over a hundred hangings there. The cell had two windows, one looking out on a swamp, the other on a roof top. It was very close and very dirty. At perhaps nine a.m. the bus from the county farm arrived to pick us up to go back to Drew to get arraigned. The freedom songs floated up to our cell as the jailor let us out. The driver was a Negro trusty, in the traditional striped suit. In Drew we waited two hours in the hot sun. We sang freedom songs. We sang "We got the whole world in our hands. We got chief Floyd right in our hands" at this the chief rushed on to the bus and threatened that if we sang anything more about him or his town he would have our bail raised to \$500 apiece for harrassing a police officer. Our next verse was, "We got you know who right in our hands". Finally we were taken in to City Hall one by one to be arraigned by the mayor in front of all the officials of the county, it seemed like. They then took group pictures of us. Reminded me of class pictures at school. We were then packed back in the bus, given a hamburger apiece (no water), and sent back to Indianola. I drank in the passing flat green fields with keen enjoyment, not knowing when I would see the openness again. At Indianola they let off all the girls this time. As we drove over toward the county farm the trusty driving had a good time beeping at people as we passed. He even beeped at some white folks stopping under a tree to eat lunch. Guess he figured he was pretty safe from further abuse in his present position. I dug his spirit. The bus drove up passed a big comfortable looking farm house. The trusty doffed his hat as we passed. Then he backed up to a barn and we were unloaded from the back of the bus into two stalls on either side of a twenty-foot wide coridor. The white cell was relatively large with two windows looking out on the farm but smelled strongly of urine and filth. On the cement floor were strewn 10 or so grubby mattresses. The place was sluttered with refuse including bloody rags, rat droppings, a decaying mouse, fag butts, etc., on which a wealth of flies were feeding. The Negro guys across the hall found a snake skin in their cell. Some of the guys whiled away the long afternoon by constructing a checker board and using change for men. I tried to

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evening rolled in we got quite hungry. One of the guys has hypoglycemia which is aggravated by lack of food. We asked the jailor for some food for George. He said he would see if there were any leftovers. He never came back. With the last rays of sunlight the flies retired but were relieved by a swarm of mosquitoes. The night was spent in a ferocious battle. My headache let up, so it was a relief to be able to pace up and down in the cool night air avoiding them. At about seven a.m. we received breakfast of rolls—a vast improvement over the Indianola bisquits—molasses, salt-back, and something like coffee. Boy, that hot coffee tasted wonderful! The trustees made sure we had as much as we wanted. Even the white inmate thought to not put as much sugar in the coffee because he remembers that the folks up North don't drink it so sweet.

(the following sentences NOT for publication!!) The sheriff the day before had threatened our lawyer that he wasn't responsible for what the trustys would do to us. We found them willing to risk disciplinary actions to go out of their way to sneak us tobacco.

(From now on we can quote again, N.) There was a beautiful boy of 17 who was sentenced to a year at the county farm for as he called it "Being a bad boy". Oh Lord, what a crime against humanity!

As the morning rolled on we wondered about how long we might be in. It seemed that if they didn't spring us by five that evening we might not get out until Monday, a thought few of us could accept with composure. Presently the sheriff came to take one of the boys to answer the phone. It was Senator Keating, who has a policy of calling all New Yorkers imprisoned down here. The guy told him about the bugs and the jailor got white hot, paced back and forth and shouted "Liar liar". As the man brought him back to the cell, he could not contain a whoop of glee for having struck back at his tormenter, for having exercised some power over the man which in this situation had almost absolute power over him. There followed a long discussion of what should be our strategy vs. the jailor. Some thought we should exercise as much power as possible, keep asking for improvements. Others thought that we shouldn't rock the boat. They pointed out that he had closed the front door in retaliation and might react more violently if we kept pushing him against the wall. The others felt that by keeping the initiative we would keep him off balance and thus might get some improvements. Few felt that it would do much good to appeal to the humanity of a man so diametrically opposed to us. The practice of nonviolence or love in situations like that takes skill and faith that few of us have.

Every crackle of gravel on the drive was nurtured with breathless silence to see if it might grow into our liberators. At noon we realized grimly that there were only 5 hours of hope left in this day. At 12:30 the door opened and the jailor let us out. It was a great time! We shook hands with our fellows from across the hall. Man 'twas a fine feeling. We came home to a bath, shave, food, friends...

The total bail was \$4,800. They had to get money from every one they could think of. The money for the community center and freedom school was used. As you can see, it will be much harder next time. If yawl have any thing to spare this is a pressing need. We had local people taking a first courageous step. They need support if they are to continue and win a new more just relationship with the forces of law in their town. Make checks out to Southern Community Centers (our running fund) and send to me or Charles McLaurin.

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Letters or calls to our Senators suggesting that they might help by adopting Keatings's practice would also help. These calls I think are effective inhibitors.

When I had been home for just a few hours some one came to say that Mr. Shield was in the hospital. I was afraid that my presence there might prejudice the treatment he got, but others assured me that they were quite good up there. So when his son came in from the neighboring town I accompanied him to the hospital. Mr. Shield introduced us to another patient as his two sons. I was real happy about that. He had some sort of kidney problem but it appeared to be not too serious. I had a good talk with his son after we got home. He was in the army, which liberated him from much of the uneasiness that other folks down here have in talking to us whites. It smarted quite a bit he said to come back from the racially egalitarian army to the Mississippi caste system. Saturday night a daughter came in from Chicago with her four beautiful children, including Aazon and Abigail who were here before. She is a dignified competent mother with many of her mother's mannerisms. She lives in an integrated neighborhood in west Chicago. It was fun to see her handle the white storekeeper this morning with a quick set of orders and none of the nodding and smiling that he is used to. She was in high school in Money, Miss., when a 13 year old boy from Chicago named Emmet Till was taken out and killed by two of the leading citizens in those parts. She said it was a hell of a thing to live through.

A man at the hospital last night from Rome, just north of Parchman Farm told of how three white men took a Negro from his house and beat him so badly that he died at 1 p.m. Saturday. The system lives on.

With our little house here getting full of people, I suggested that I might find a place to move. Charlie is leaving tomorrow to stay in Indianola. They wouldn't hear of anything of the kind. I hope to work out an arrangement to sleep on the couch and thus leave the double bed free for some of the others. It is a very wonderful house to be connected with.

This afternoon we had a gruelling staff meeting to try to work out some of the problems that have been developing among staff members and to try to gird up our sagging discipline. It is interesting to see the friction caused by different styles of decision making. The northern college kids are oriented toward group decision making... lot of discussion of problems etc. Mac gets very impatient with this. Partly, I think it is a feeling of his that we are encroaching on his leadership by questioning his decisions. Partly it is his action orientation. This discussion back and forth seems unnecessary to him and very irritating. Some of the northern kids think him a bit high-handed. I think we will all learn something but it can be a bit painful. Afterwards, some of us went to the white man's gas station to get a pop. On returning with a box of pops for the people out in front of Mrs. Haner's house I passed the man's freckled little kids (we are friends). We had a chat and then I said I had to hurry back. They said sort of wistfully that they couldn't go over in that part of town (the Negro section.)

A lot of you write to ask what you can do. I hope this means that you have energy to spare after really tackling the problem in your home towns. Man, I know I didn't contribute much in Philly before coming down. If you still have time and energy and money after that, we need bail money as mentioned above. Another thing is to approach

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your Democratic National Committeeman and line him up to support the Miss. Freedom Dem. Party's challenge of the seating of the official Miss. Dem. Party at the national convention. As far as I know Calif., Mich., Wisc., and Coll. and N.Y. Dem. Parties have pledged support. I don't think Pa. is lined up yet.

Thanks again for your letters. It was a terrific boost to receive three on returning from jail I am afraid I really went on excessively long this time.

Much love,
Mike